

3 1761 07483278 3

*The Language of
the Birds*

By Adolf Paul

PT

2631

A74

L313



PURCHASED FOR THE
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY
FROM THE
CANADA COUNCIL SPECIAL GRANT
FOR
DRAMA



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
University of Toronto

The Language of the Birds

*A Comedy by
Adolf Paul*



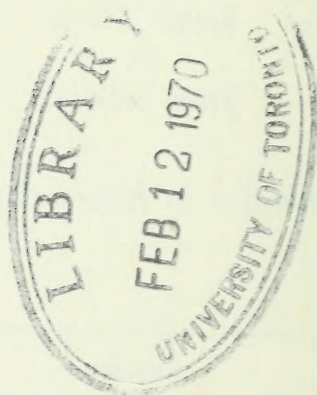
*Only Authorized
English Translation
by
ARTHUR TRAVERS-BORGSTROEM*

*Scenic Music
by
Jean Sibelius*

Introduction by Henry C. Shelley

*London
Alfred Montgomery, Whitehall House
29 Charing Cross, S.W.1
1922*

PT
2631
A74L313





Abner Paul

Introduction

ADOLF PAUL'S reputation on the Continent would doubtless have extended to England long ere this if it had not been for the Great War. His most pronounced success as a dramatist was achieved in Vienna almost on the eve of the conflict which, of necessity, made as great havoc of the literary as of the political interchange of European thought.

Born in West Gothia, Sweden, on January 6th, 1863, he was taken to Finland in his ninth year and began his education at the Lyceum at Abo. As his father intended him to follow his own profession as agriculturist, he was afterwards sent to the Agricultural Institute of Mustiala, near Jokkis, in central Finland, and on completing his course there he managed one of his father's farms for several years.

Agriculture, however, was not to absorb talents destined for Art. His first attempt to escape was made by the avenue of Music. In brief, he left the land for Helsingfors Musical Conservatoire, where he began his intimate friendship with Jean Sibelius. His master was Feruccio Busoni, the celebrated Italian pianist and composer, whom he followed to Weimar to complete his musical studies preparatory to realizing his youthful ambition to win fame in the concert room.

Ere, however, it was too late to avoid the tragedy of misdirected effort, Paul realized that his prospects of achieving fame as a pianist were not reassuring.

Music no more than Agriculture was to provide him with a medium of expression.

At this juncture he found himself adrift in Berlin, soon, however, to find a haven in Journalism. At an early age he had made experiments in writing, and now he quickly discovered that the pen, rather than the piano, was his natural instrument. So pronounced indeed was his *flair* for journalism that in a very short time he became a veritable syndicate of Berlin correspondence, contributing regularly to leading newspapers in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, etc.

All this journalistic activity had its inevitable result in definite authorship. His *début* as a novelist was made in 1891 with 'En Bok om en Menniska' ('A Book about a Human Being'). Since that date he has placed to his credit not merely a large number of novels and short stories, but also some thirty plays.

One of the earliest of the latter was his historical drama of 'King Christian II' (of Denmark) which, with music by his friend Sibelius, achieved a pronounced success when performed in 1898 at the Swedish Theatre in Helsingfors and at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm. A year later at the same two theatres Paul enhanced his reputation by another historical play 'Karin Maansdotter,' an arresting study of that beautiful daughter of a Finnish soldier whose marriage with Eric XIV of Sweden was so large a factor in the misfortunes of that monarch. These two plays have since been frequently performed all over Sweden and Finland.

Meantime, however, the Swedish journalist and novelist and dramatist had acquired a knowledge of German, and naturally he was not long in utilizing that language as an additional medium of expression.

Several of his experiments in German brought him into conflict with authority as represented by the police and those voluntary guardians of public morality and good taste in literature who arrogate to themselves the title of Vigilance Societies. Three of those conflicts, however, had ludicrous results.

Hard upon the publication of Paul's 'The Madonna and the Rose Bush,' a somewhat daring novel based upon the Lübeckian legend, a Hamburg newspaper published a eulogistic article on the book. Quickly thereafter the committee of the Hamburg Vigilance Society intervened with a pamphlet seething with indignation at the desecration of the simple principles of morality and condemning the novel and its author in unmeasured terms. Confident in their belief that there was no immoral tendency in the book, Paul and his publisher brought an action against the authors of the pamphlet, who were mostly Protestant pastors. At the trial, each of these irate pamphleteers was obliged to confess that he had not read the book! The issue may be imagined. Beside being fined for their pamphlet, the Vigilance Committee were severely rebuked for allowing themselves, as educated men, to become responsible for such irregular proceedings.

Nor did authority fare better in its second tilt against Paul. Reading in a newspaper one afternoon

the proverb that no church is built without the devil bringing one stone to the structure, an idea in development of that sentiment quickened in his brain after he had gone to bed. Rising immediately he began writing at full speed, and did not rest until he had completed the scenario of a play which was to give him rank with the most forcible dramatists.

Performed at the Thalia Theatre in Hamburg, the première of 'Teufelskirche' ('The Devil's Church') was such a tremendous success that the house was quickly sold out for the whole of the following week. Then the police intervened, the play forbidden, and a legal process began. The Court, however, quickly decided that there was nothing in the play inimical to religion, much to Paul's disappointment, who was revelling in the prospect of being able to demonstrate in Court the complete innocence of his play.

Undeterred by these failures, authority made yet another attempt to silence Paul. This happened in Bavaria in connection with his super-modern comedy entitled 'Not For Sale.' When the performance of this play was forbidden in Munich, the author had the satisfaction of reminding his enemies that that very comedy had previously been given the place of honour in a gala performance at Nuremberg held in celebration of the birthday of the revered Prince Regent of Bavaria.

Paul's dramatic record, however, includes many plays with which authority has no fault to find. Many of these have been published in Germany,

and his acted achievements—in addition to those of Scandinavian lands—have included numerous highly successful performances at the Hof Theatre of Munich, the Max Theatre of Berlin, and the Royal Burg Theatre of Vienna.

It was at the last named celebrated theatre that, on the 29th of November, 1911, was given the first performance of ‘The Language of the Birds.’ Once more Paul’s early friend, Jean Sibelius, provided the music for the drama of his fellow student of the Helsingfors Musical Conservatoire.

There was never a moment’s doubt about Vienna’s verdict on ‘The Language of the Birds.’ The first presentation was received in an exceptionally favourable manner by an audience which ranks as high in critical appreciation as that which attends the premières of the Comedie-Française. Whatever change the war may have wrought in the mental alertness of the patrons of the Royal Burg Theatre, it was at its keenest in the winter of 1911. Hence it was no mean triumph for Paul that each act of ‘The Language of the Birds’ heightened the enthusiasm of its reception, and that the author was compelled to make several appearances when the curtain finally fell.

From that date ‘The Language of the Birds’ has had a permanent place on the repertoire of the Royal Burg Theatre, where it has often been revived. Nor is that all. The comedy, with its delightful Sibelius music, has also been performed with pronounced success at Prague and Budapest by the company

responsible for its original production. It was in connection with the Budapest performance that the *Pester Lloyd* critic wrote: 'Adolf Paul juggles with words, thoughts, and feelings with a confidence and inventiveness that is in no way inferior to that of Bernard Shaw.' Another comparison is worth noting. A critic of the *Berliner Tageblatt* declared that "'The Language of the Birds'" is a measured humorously grumbling piece of Strindbergism, wittier than the arch-earnest Swede ever was.'

Despite those comparisons, which would be illuminating in connection with the work of most other dramatists, 'The Language of the Birds' is rather difficult to place. In its form it belongs to the neo-romantic movement; in its contents it might almost be classified in the naturalistic school. On the one hand, the comedy is not without some affinity to Maeterlinck's 'L'Interieur' by reason of its suggestion of the loneliness of the noble soul; and on the other hand, its insistence upon purely subjective crises is reminiscent of the most distinctive work of Hofmannsthal.

Still, the critic who hinted at a comparison between Paul and his fellow Swede, Strindberg, could easily cite chapter and verse in justification of his opinion. Two plays in particular belong to the same category as 'The Language of the Birds'—namely, 'The Fathers' and 'The Creditors.' In the former one of the characters exclaims to his wife: 'You have a diabolical power of making your will prevail'; in the other we read: 'If the woman doesn't become

the man's, he becomes hers, and then we have a topsy-turvey world.' Does Paul wish us to regard Abishag as his contribution to the feminist discussion? Is it his intention, like Strindberg, to deal a mortal blow at the equality-of-the-sexes claim by depicting woman at her worst?

Perhaps, and perhaps not. For there is much more in 'The Language of the Birds.' As with many another distinguished dramatist, Paul's selection of an ancient theme does not handicap him in pointing a modern moral. Besides, it is merely the germ of his story which he has derived from biblical history; its rich amplification and development, his masterly analysis of Solomon's kingly nature, of Sabud's pathetic weakness, and of Abishag's unashamed baseness, are all his own.

Perhaps the supreme moral of 'The Language of the Birds' is this: the tragic case of the man who is lacking in self-mastery. 'I wished to awaken the man in thee' is surely the clue to Solomon's dealings with Sabud; and the moral is further enforced by the King's dictum: 'He who cannot subdue woman's masterfulness, he will have small joy out of possessing her.' And again: 'Love is the healthy, exuberant impulse to self-preservation; it giveth itself, and it can give *without* thereby giving up its own individual life.'

Hence Solomon's laugh when he bade Sabud ask some great boon—the laugh which filled Sabud with nameless fear—was not so much cynical as pathetically ironic. His wisdom enabled him to

foresee what the tragic result would be; for Sabud the downfall of his manhood, and for himself the loss of the friendship he valued most. Indeed Solomon's understanding of Sabud's weakness was so unerring that he was sadly confident that his friend would break his oath not to reveal to Abishag the secret of the birds.

In its stagecraft this comedy can challenge comparison with the finest dramatic work of the day. It respects the unities in a surprisingly faithful manner; its three characters are sharply defined and perfectly consistent; the action is developed with many arresting surprises; and the 'curtains' have dramatic value of an unusual kind. All through, too, the language is alluringly faithful to its model of the Song of Solomon—a faithfulness which has been effectively preserved in Mr. Travers-Borgstroem's sensitive translation.

HENRY C. SHELLEY.

Dramatis Personæ

SOLOMON

SABUD

ABISHAG OF SHUNEM

HEAD CHAMBERLAIN OF PALACE

ATTENDANTS OF KING

ABISHAG'S WAITING WOMEN

EXECUTIONER, HENCHMEN, ETC.





The Language of the Birds

ACT ONE

Apartment on ground floor of SABUD's house. Fitted up in oriental style. In background, door and window, through which is seen garden, with trees and bushes in bloom. In foreground, to the right, stairs leading up to women's apartments. On the right, a divan with cushions. SABUD sits on divan with crossed legs, gazing with melancholy air out into sun-bathed garden. Listens to twittering of birds, sighs dejectedly, and quite forgets his hookah, with the tube of which he plays mechanically.

SABUD (*with a deep sigh*). Ah me, unfortunate!

(ABISHAG raises carpet that hides entrance to women's apartments, remains standing, and gazes tenderly at SABUD.)

SABUD. Ah me, unfortunate! Ah me, most miserable!

ABISHAG (*raises her veil*). O Lord and Master, thy brow is furrowed, thine eyes are full of trouble! (*Goes up to him.*) What presseth upon thy soul, what maketh thy breast to heave in anguish? (*Sits down beside him.*) Why do thy lips breathe bitterness, instead of smiling lovingly toward me? Did not my kisses gladden thee? Wert thou not happy in my love? Say, art thou weary of me already?

SABUD (*looks up at her, smiling sorrowfully*). Abishag of Shunem, fairest of flowers! Thy soul is sweeter than honey! Thine eyes gleam like the stars in the heavens of night! Thy breath is perfume, thy voice is music! As balm upon an open sore thy nearness! Thy kisses madden like strong wine, and thine embrace doth promise blissful forgetfulness! (*Sighs again and looks sorrowfully away.*) Ah me, unfortunate! Ah me, most miserable!

ABISHAG (*vexed, turns away from him*). Of a truth unfortunate, if thou hast all that thou praisest as bliss, and yet callest thyself most miserable! If my embrace promised thee blissful forgetfulness, and yet did not bring it, then thou dost not love me! (*Stands up*).

SABUD (*kisses the hem of her garment*). As the gazelle of the desert, parched with thirst, yearns for the cool of the fountain, so doth my soul yearn for thee, thou sunlight of my day—thou star of my great longing, so near to me and yet raised so high above me!

ABISHAG (*haughtily*). Thou speakest the truth when thou sayest that I am so high above thee! And yet how pitiful is the longing that cannot raise itself up to mine! What care I for a love that bows and bends in the dust like a worm, anxiously?—Seething desire, live coals aglow, the fire that burns, all that is here—for thee! (*both hands to her bosom*). And where flame should unite with flame, and rise upwards together in the joy of living, there only the cold breath of deadly anguish meets me, changes the delight of day into the pale dread of night, and transforms my love into angry disdain! I could trample upon thee, thou that hast everything, and canst not possess what thou hast!

SABUD (*hides his face in his hands*). Ah me, most wretched!

ABISHAG (*vehemently*). Thou hast me, and callest thyself 'wretched!' And what am I then, that thou shouldst thus cover me with shame?

SABUD. Thou art Abishag—my Abishag, my life, mine all!

ABISHAG. Thy lips say so. But at the very moment they exhale the breath of the grave—an icy coldness invades my heart and makes the blood freeze in my veins. Instead of the wedding bed, once more I stand before the couch of death, even as that dread day when they brought me to the bed of King David, in the bosom of my lord the King to cherish the embers of expiring royalty.

SABUD. Ah, woe is me!

ABISHAG. Nay, woe is me much more, the victim of a curse that hath doomed my young life always to be wedded to the dead. The King, my consort, died without having known me even in his wishes.

SABUD. The Lord be with him!

ABISHAG. Solomon received me into his women's apartments, and honoured me so that he deigned not to touch mine honour.

SABUD. To me—his only friend—he gave thee, Abishag, to honour me above all things!

ABISHAG. And thou doest as were there nothing bestowed upon thee—as were there still a whole world left for thee to wish for!

SABUD (*despairingly*). Nothing is left for me to wish for! Nothing at all!

ABISHAG. And thou complainest?

SABUD. I do! I *must* have something to wish for!

ABISHAG. What forces thee?

SABUD. His command!

ABISHAG. I understand thee not!

SABUD (*rises and comes nearer to her*). Hear me, O Abishag! When Solomon, our lord, my exalted friend, mounted the throne of David, his father, he distributed amongst his trusty servants the honours and high stations of the kingdom. To me alone he reserved the place of friend, with me he discussed his most secret projects, to me he confided all things, to me he opened the recesses of his heart, closed to the outer world. For me

he drew aside the curtain of his soul insomuch that his inmost self lay bare before me, naked and unveiled, in all its beauty. Ever was I with him. And so great was his love for me, so strong his trust, that he even—unheard of thing—bade me accompany him into the seclusion of his women's apartments, when he went thither in secret. Then did I see thee——

ABISHAG (*smiling*). I know besides——

SABUD. Then did I see thee, O Abishag, and my senses left me. The sun lost its light, the world its glory. All that had been sank into darkness. Forgotten was the King, the voice of friendship no longer reached mine ear, deepest despondency filled my soul, and the death-worm gnawed at my heart-strings. For I might not possess thee! So sacred had the touch of the Lord's Anointed made thy body, that every thought that should have ventured to approach thee became an inexpressible crime. I knew it—and all strength forsook me. With a single glance didst thou drink out my soul! I dared not hope to seek redemption in thy love, I wasted away, and slowly the vital spark grew dull within me. The King saw it——

ABISHAG (*smiling*). He saw it——

SABUD. He saw what ailed me—had pity upon me, and spoke to me words of comfort. I heard the music of his voice, vibrating to the warm friendship of his heart—but my soul remained as if deaf.

His words fluttered past me like homeless birds, without finding entrance into my consciousness. Until one day, full of infinite compassion, he placed his hand upon my feverish brow, looked deep into mine eyes, and with a smile of ineffable goodness he said, 'Take her—I give thee her—I give thee Abishag of Shunem to be thy wife!' Then were mine ears opened. (*In the garden outside the twittering of the birds grows stronger. He draws her with him towards the open door.*)
Dost hear, Abishag?

ABISHAG. I hear.

SABUD. Like the birds out there, so did my poor tortured soul rejoice, so did it send up a thousand-tongued thanksgiving to the merciful Creator who had called it to life again. The gates of exultation were thrown open, once more the sun shone resplendent and the world glittered before my delighted eyes in magic glamour, the warm sap of life rose strong within me and filled my heart almost to bursting, ran riot through my veins and ever back to the heart, bringing to every part of the body the glad tidings, 'Thou livest! Thou mayest live! To thee is vouchsafed to grasp the goblet of highest bliss and quaff it to the dregs!' I wished to thank him, but I found no words, tears only—hot tears of joy ran down my cheeks, as I fell to his feet and kissed his hands. (*Kisses her hands passionately.*)

ABISHAG (*moved*). Beloved! (*Strokes his hair and touches it with her lips.*)

SABUD. Then did he speak again, and every word of his burned itself into my memory. 'Friend,' he said, 'how wonderful is life! My brother Adonijah desired Abishag, and met his fate—in death. Thou didst not dare to ask for her and wert doomed to die, because thou mightest not live with her, yet couldst not live without her. Tongue-tied didst thou sink into extinction, instead of into her arms. Thy self-abasement deserves the highest honours. Wherefore, instead of death, I give thee life. I give thee Abishag of Shunem to be thy lawful spouse. I give thee lands, treasures, great preferment. And after me thou shalt be the highest in the realm. Moreover, that this my will may be made right manifest to thee and to all the people, thou shalt have the privilege of asking a special boon of me, over and above all that I have already promised—nay, it is my express command that thou shalt do this and demand of me some thing so great that others would not dare to ask for it. Whatever it be—save only my kingly crown and dignity—it shall be thine, so that thou mayest see and comprehend how gracious a king and friend thou hast in me.'

ABISHAG (*shaking her head*). And it is this that maketh thee so sad?

SABUD. It is. For as he said these words, he laughed, and his laugh had a strange sound, a tinge of craft and malice that made me shudder. He gave me happiness and took it from me again at the same

moment. Between us two stands his express command that I shall utter a wish that I have not—that I can have no longer! I may not disobey his will—yet know I nothing more to wish for—and life is thus become a burden to me.

ABISHAG. Come, sit thee down, and I will sit by thee. Let us two seek together and we shall find! So. (*They sit down on the cushions.*) Lay thy head in my bosom—try to think of nothing except that thou lovest me and art mine, and thou wilt see, an idea will suddenly come to thee! Dost hear how the birds are twittering again?

SABUD. How differently from just now! (*Sits up all at once.*) It sounds like his laugh, when he gave me that command! Half derisive, half threatening! Half mocking, half malicious! It was no longer the friend—it was the face of another, of a stranger, that suddenly peered out from behind the friendly mask, as he said those words. And this other one I see every day, when he cometh to me to ask me about that wish. Ever more threatening he looks, each time he asks in vain. And I fear him now! I fear him, *him*, my dearest friend, whose presence formerly gave me only joy, him do I now fear, as were he the destroyer of my happiness—of the happiness that he himself did give me.

ABISHAG. Thou dost him wrong!

SABUD. No! No! Soon shalt thou see it—when he cometh again to ask me! Only yesterday did he

enjoin me strictly to answer him to-day. It sounded like a threat. But what can I do? What shall I ask of him?

ABISHAG. Treasures! More treasures! His riches are untold.

SABUD. His bounty hath already given me more than I can expend!

ABISHAG. Office, titles!

SABUD. Honours abundantly he gave me as to none other. Above all, did he not give me the most beautiful and adorable woman from his palace! What more then is there left for me to desire?

ABISHAG (*is about to reply, but is prevented by the loud twittering of the birds in the garden outside. Says somewhat impatiently.*) What are the birds twittering about so loudly? Why, I can hardly hear my own voice! (*Calls out to the birds.*) Be quiet there! No one did ask for your opinion!

(*Violent twittering.*)

SABUD (*smiling*). Perhaps they wished to tell me what to ask for!

ABISHAG. Thou dost not understand them then?

SABUD. Unfortunately not!

ABISHAG. See how they turn their little heads, how intelligently they look at us, how eagerly they chatter with one another. Surely they understand us!

SABUD. They are much shrewder than we are.

ABISHAG. And what if they tell the king all that we say of him? What if he understood them——

SABUD (*starts up. Exclaims abruptly.*) He does. He understands them. It will be my death! He speaks all languages. He reads all writings. He knows all magic spells! Before him was no man who could boast such learning—nor after him shall there be found his equal!

ABISHAG. Then speaketh he the language of the birds! The feathered songsters of the air are then his confidants?

SABUD. They are his friends, they carry all to him! At this very moment one of them is surely twittering in his ear every word we say. He will hasten hither to punish us—already I feel him coming! There—I hear steps on the garden gravel! Dost hear the twittering? Dost hear how they exult? It is he!

ABISHAG (*quickly*). Ask for his knowledge then!

SABUD. What meanest thou?

ABISHAG. Demand his secret, so shalt thou be his equal. He shall initiate thee into his art! He shall teach thee the language of the birds! Require it of him!

SABUD (*aghast*). How should I dare?

ABISHAG (*with still more emphasis*). How shouldst thou not?

SABUD. That would be seeking his life.

ABISHAG. Yet without giving him his death! Strike at his life! Did he not give thee the right? Did he not give thee his friendship? Did he not wed his soul to thine?

SABUD. Did that give me the right to abuse his kindness?

ABISHAG. Demand it! It is thy right! No other might do so and live! Thou only. Only thee did he raise so high! Did he not, moreover, command thee to express just such a wish as this in order to show him that thou art conscious of thy high place and fearest not to confront him, as equal would equal, just as he wished thee to. Do it therefore! Ask!

SABUD (*drawing himself up*). I will! (*Embraces her tumultuously, kisses her, impassioned.*) My love! My love! I thank thee!

(*SOLOMON appears at garden gate, remains standing and gazes at them, smiling, leaning against gatepost.*)

SOLOMON. Sabud! My friend!

(*SABUD releases her from his embrace, draws back a little in alarm. ABISHAG quickly lets fall her veil. Both make deep obeisance.*)

SOLOMON (*with lowering brow*). Thou tremblest before me? Thou, my friend?

SABUD (*persisting in his abject attitude*). Bear with thy servant, O Lord and Master! But when I

trembled, it was not from a bad conscience, nor from fear of my benefactor, but only because thou foundest me unready to receive thee in becoming fashion—because thine eyes were forced to behold that which custom and good usage hath banished to the sacredness of seclusion. Therefore I ask forgiveness. (*Bows down to the ground.*)

SOLOMON. Another should have asked forgiveness on his knees! Not thou, thou to whom it was permitted to accompany me even into the forbidden precincts of my women's apartments. It was my friend Sabud, to whom it was vouchsafed there to pluck the loveliest of flowers. To-day it is a stranger that talks of forgiveness to me!

SABUD. Master, thy speech is hard.

SOLOMON. As thy heart, so are my words! Doth thy heart accuse thee of having transgressed against what is becoming, then hast thou so done. *How* matters not! I ask not how! If thou build up a wall between us, *I* will not pull it down. On the one side Sabud, with guilt-laden conscience, praying for forgiveness. On the other side his gracious lord and master, who grants forgiveness. (*Contemptuously.*) Thinkest thou to have sinned against what is becoming, then it becomes thee to give what is becoming its due! Obey good custom and remove thy wife!

(*SABUD and ABISHAG bow to the ground. ABISHAG withdraws through doorway leading to women's*

apartments. Before disappearing she makes yet another obeisance. SABUD lets fall carpet that covers doorway and remains standing in submissive attitude.)

SOLOMON (*contemptuously*). Man—how womanish hast thou become! How art thou stripped of thy virility!

SABUD (*shrinking*). Master——

SOLOMON. A man doth not veil the face of his soul, a man showeth his face openly to friend and enemy without malice, without contrition. But thy will is faltering fear—thy truth is untruth—thine eyes are ashamed to look up! Thou art become womanish!

SABUD (*straightening himself, vehemently*). Have done! Thou insultest me!

SOLOMON. That is better. But not enough by far! The anger of the rebuked who knows himself in the wrong—impotent rage—hate, that is no hate, but only love turned into wounded self-love. Where is the open countenance of the friend in whom was no guile? What hath transformed unquestioning confidence into timid uncertainty, into suspicion even? Suspicion of *me*, thy friend! 'Tis pitiful. I only wished thee well.

SABUD. And gave me woe.

SOLOMON. But well was often felt as were it woe, because misunderstood!

SABUD. Explain it me!

SOLOMON. As in every human being, so also in thy soul of souls did I see man and woman closely clinging to one another as in a wedding-bed, slumbering on unconsciously toward the inevitable consummation. I wished to awake the man in thee.

SABUD. To subservience to thy caprices!

SOLOMON. To freedom, Sabud! Why else did I give thee an imperious wife, if not to force thee to revolt? But in her the man was stronger than in thee. She hath enslaved thee! (*Disdainfully.*) Thou art become womanish! And he who loves a woman and becomes womanish, he is past help.

SABUD (*vehemently*). Master, thou mockest me!

SOLOMON. Challenge not my mockery! Think not I gave thee her only to mock thee afterwards. Thou hast disappointed me, Sabud! Instead of playing the man, thou pinest away; instead of being master and thus to remain thine own master, thou hast become her tool and she thy master!

SABUD. Thou doest her wrong, O King.

SOLOMON. I am not blind to her charm. But I tell thee, had she not come sacred from my father's bed—even then I had not touched her. And Adonijah, who desired her, would have been doomed in any case. For never could he have subdued her. And he who cannot subdue woman's masterfulness, he will have small joy out of possessing her.

SABUD. Thou art unjust to her, unjust to me! She is nought but love-enrapturing, soul-inspiring love. And how were it possible for the possessor of such treasure not to be imbued with highest happiness without being ungrateful?

SOLOMON. Why then this grief? Why then this evil conscience? What troubled thy happiness?

SABUD (*vehemently*). Thou, O King! Thou gavest me happiness. 'Take it,' didst thou say, 'take it and be discontent.'

SOLOMON. I commanded thee to wish for something more.

SABUD. How could I?

SOLOMON. In truth most sad, that thou shouldst be so easy to satisfy!

SABUD. I understand thee not, O Master!

SOLOMON. When I gave thee that which seemed to thee highest happiness, and in the same breath enjoined thee to wish for something more, I did so, not in order to trouble thy happiness, but in order to fortify it. I did so out of friendship, lest thou shouldst give thyself wholly away under the will of another. But if thou art content to be her serf and slave, if thou canst wish for no other thing in life, then art thou lost, then art thou a man no longer, then is thy life no life!

SABUD. I love her.

SOLOMON. Love that willeth self-annihilation is no

love. 'Tis weakness only. Love is the will to live. Love is the healthy, exuberant impulse to self-preservation, it giveth itself, and it can give *without* thereby giving up its own individual life—in giving it expandeth spiritually—in the blind craving for living, living for ever, it fortifies itself and intensifies itself. Only thus canst thou in woman see thy paradise! But as thou now livest, luxurious, without a wish, thou wilt lose thyself in luxuriousness—thus wilt thou change love into torment; thus wilt thou extinguish the spark of life, of life unending, which the Most High gave thee as thy earthly prize.

SABUD. God forbid that such a thing should be!

SOLOMON. I saw it coming when I saw thee fall ill of love-sickness for her.

SABUD (*blissfully*). And thou gavest me her.

SOLOMON. Thy life was dear to me, I wished to save thee, therefore did I give thee her.

SABUD (*kisses his hand*). A life of thanks will not suffice to thank thee for it.

SOLOMON (*draws back his hand, sternly*). Then risk not life through more unthankfulness. (*In same tone as before.*) To save thee, I gave thee her. Thus did I hope to raise thee—to teach thee how to raise thyself and thus to remain master of thyself. *Therefore* did I command thee to wish for something more, something that only thou and none other might ask for.

SABUD. Would thou hadst never done it!

SOLOMON. From love I did it. For so great was my love for thee that even when I gave thee into her power, even *then* I did not give thee up. Requite not therefore my love with base ingratitude. Give thy wish wings to fly straight to my heart of hearts, that I may cherish it there, thus giving us the double joy of gracious granting.

SABUD. Great Master, thy favour makes me happy—and unhappy too! Thou commandest me to wish—and leavest me no thing to wish for. Where is there any wish imaginable, that thou hast left for me unfulfilled? With honours and riches hast thou overwhelmed me. How then should I not be content, I, the poor son of a priest? How could I show myself greedy and insatiable before thee?

SOLOMON. Others may dare to ask for gold and treasures. Sabud may dare more.

SABUD. Shall I then stand before thee vain and arrogant, thou that hast shown me honour far above my merit?

SOLOMON. What I gave thee thou didst merit. And others also. But Sabud may demand more.

SABUD. What could my heart desire more than that thou gavest it with Abishag?

SOLOMON. Doth not thy heart tell thee? Hath thy heart no other instinct than that which draws it to Abishag, no wish that touches my person so

nearly—short of impinging upon my royal estate—that I could grant it to my dearest friend, and to him alone, graciously and from a full heart; a wish which no other might dare to ask without sealing his own death-doom?

(SABUD looks up, on the point of speaking, then looks away, not venturing to speak out.)

SOLOMON (*lays his hand on SABUD's shoulder and draws him gently nearer*). Say it! Speak out! Forget thy Lord and Master! Think only of thy friend, whose heart lies open before thee! Let thy wish reach to my heart—thy soul flutteringly mingle with mine! Speak! (*Twittering in garden. SOLOMON smiles.*)

SABUD (*hesitatingly*). Great Master, many a gift did Providence give thee, denied to other mortals. Thy wisdom is still greater than thy goodness, And thy goodness is infinite!

SOLOMON (*displeased*). Meddle not with my wisdom, when I am speaking to thee from my heart!

SABUD. And yet I must. Thy goodness gave that which it did give. Now may thy wisdom give me a gift so great that none other dared ask it—a gift that neither avarice nor ambition did suggest.

SOLOMON (*ill at ease*). Speak then!

SABUD. Give me the gift of being able to understand them—out there! Teach me the language of the birds!

SOLOMON (*frowning*). Thou graspest at my crown?

Thou demandest my power?

SABUD. I demand thy wisdom!

SOLOMON (*sternly*). My wisdom is my power. Who grasps at it is doomed.

SABUD. Then must I die?

SOLOMON. So would it seem. For I have promised, and must give thee the promised gift. And that fatal gift brings death—though not by my hand. Thou shalt know the great secret. But first must thou swear by God, the All-Powerful, never to reveal it to any living thing. And dost thou break thine oath then shalt thou die the death by headsman's hand! Wilt thou swear the oath?

SABUD (*raising his hand to heaven*). By God, the All-Powerful! And if I break mine oath, then may I die the death by headsman's hand!

SOLOMON. So be it! For he who possesses my knowledge, he shares my power. I will share it with thee. But with thee *only*.

SABUD. Thou hast heard mine oath.

SOLOMON. And shall live to see thee break it! Of thyself thou hast not hit upon this great request. Thou hast not the guile for it. *That* only the vaulting ambition of a domineering woman could have devised.

(SABUD *turns away*.)

SOLOMON (*continuing*). Who in her criminal audacity so overstepped all bounds as to wish to rule over

me, the King, through my best friend! But that shall never be! Thou shalt have thy wish. But first shalt thou go to her and tell her that I have already told thee all.

SABUD (*vehemently*). Thou demandest that of me?

SOLOMON. Such is my will, my irrevocable command.

SABUD. Master, thou demandest the impossible! To *her*, who seeth through me as were I of crystal; to *her* toward whom my whole being doth course as the poor streamlet toward the all-merging sea; to *her* should I go with a lie upon my lips?

SOLOMON (*laughing*). That little lie of thine will reveal to thee a truth so great, so staggeringly great, that out of it could be borne a thousand small everyday lies. This lie of lies—the lie—will unveil to thee Woman in all her glory. So shall thine eyes be opened, and thou shalt learn to know good from evil. (*Amused.*) Go, my son, and eat thy fill from the Tree of Knowledge! (*Nods goodbye and goes out through garden, the same way as he came.*)

SABUD (*remains standing in doorway, his hands crossed over his breast, so long as SOLOMON is in sight, then exclaims vehemently*). Shackle upon shackle dost thou lay upon me, saying unto me, with a laugh, 'Free thyself! Be free! Art thou not free?' In adamant chains I am to play the freeman! Good! But if this be ruin to my happiness, then woe to thee, O Solomon! (*Draws aside curtain and ascends steps to women's apartments.*)

CURTAIN

ACT TWO

ABISHAG'S *apartment*. ABISHAG *half reclining on couch*. A SLAVE-GIRL *is engaged in fanning her, another stands at the latticed window and peeps furtively out into garden below. Steps are heard on gravel outside.*

ABISHAG. Well?

SLAVE-GIRL (*draws back a little from window-post*).
He is just going.

ABISHAG (*rising*). The King?

SLAVE-GIRL. The King. Now he goes out at the gate—the attendants kneel—the mule is led up. Now it all gleams and glitters with gold and jewels. Now he sits in the saddle. (*Shouts of jubilation outside.*)

ABISHAG (*looks towards entrance, in listening attitude*).
Hush! He comes! Retire!

(SLAVE-GIRLS *withdraw, with deep salaams*. ABISHAG *remains standing, looking expectantly towards staircase. The carpet is thrown aside violently. SABUD appears on threshold.*)

ABISHAG (*advances to meet him*). At last! I was ready to burst with impatience!

SABUD. I, too, found it hard to await his going. But now I am free. Free—through thee! (*drawing a*

long breath). If thou knewest what a relief it is. Like a nightmare that unhappy mandate weighed upon my spirit the whole time, made me heavy of heart—took from me all wish to live.

ABISHAG. Too long had I to bear with it. Speak of it now no more!

SABUD. No—no word—no syllable! Now can I breathe again, thanks to thy woman's wit. It gave me back my life! How can I thank thee for it?

ABISHAG (*looks at him with a beguiling smile*). Dost thou not know?

SABUD. I do. Thou gavest me back my life. I lay it at thy feet. Take it. I am thy slave for ever and evermore! (*kneels down and passionately kisses the hem of her robe*).

ABISHAG (*impatiently*). Not so! Stand up! I never had a taste for slaves.

SABUD (*stands up*). The King of Kings would be thy slave were he thy spouse!

ABISHAG. Were he my spouse, then would he be my master.

SABUD (*passionately*). Not master, love. (*Kisses her hands*.) My love, my love! Now nothing parts us more. No care doth cloud our happiness, no doubt disturb our heart (*keeping hold of her by the hands*). Not so, my love. Look not away. Let me look deep into thine eyes. Throw open thy soul to me, let me be merged in it. (*Draws her to*

him.) Come bliss, come rapture! Be mine!
(*Embraces her passionately, attempts to kiss her.*)

ABISHAG (*repels him, frees herself from him*). Is that all thou hast to say to me? Dost bring no further news?

SABUD (*disconcerted*). What meanest thou?

ABISHAG (*vehemently*). Here have I been waiting, counting the minutes until he should be gone, trembling with impatience for thy coming! And when thou art here at last, thou hast no more to say to me than——

SABUD. That I love thee. Doth not that suffice?

ABISHAG (*violently*). No, no!

SABUD (*dumbfounded*). Abishag!

ABISHAG (*still more violently*). Thou keepest me on the hot coals of fell impatience. I am beside myself with curiosity—and thou——

SABUD (*gives a loud laugh*). So that was it?

ABISHAG (*without stopping*). Thou dost come here and tellest me nothing—nothing at all! Dost laugh? (*Stamps with her foot.*) Well, wilt thou tell it me, or wilt thou not?

SABUD (*still laughing*). What then?

ABISHAG. What else then but the secret?

SABUD (*feigns innocence*). The secret?

ABISHAG. Of course—the secret thou hast gotten him to tell.

SABUD. He did not order *thee* to ask of him that grace.

ABISHAG. But who was it that had to suffer for it? Who did suggest what thou shouldst ask him for?

SABUD. Thou——

ABISHAG. If so, then why dost thou not tell it me? Why didst thou ask it of him then? What canst thou do alone with such a gift? Until now, did we not share every bounty of his graciousness?

SABUD. 'Tis true, but——

ABISHAG. But what? (*vehemently*). Am I thy wife—or not?

SABUD. I asked myself the same just now. Thy welcome gave me doubt, I must admit.

ABISHAG (*suddenly becoming insinuating*). Take not offence. I meant it not so ill. I love thee.

SABUD (*still offended*). That callest thou love?

ABISHAG. 'Tis true, I love thee above all measure. Canst thou not understand? Even because I love thee so—even because I shared so bitterly in all that afflicted and oppressed thy spirit, even so would I now joyfully and of a full heart share in thy new happiness, now that at last thou art freed from what oppressed thee.

SABUD. Well, do so then.

ABISHAG. How can I, when thou wilt not tell it me? How can I share in a joy that is denied to me? In truth, I had enough to bear with all that suffering

of thine. Small joy it was, I tell thee, always to submit to thine eternal sighing, unmanly lamentation. Thou lovest me not.

SABUD. I love thee above all things.

ABISHAG. Hadst thou really loved me, then had thy first thought been to bring me the gift that thou receivedst from the King. That would have been thy first impulse—and thy duty too. It was my right. If it was I that prompted thee to ask for the great gift, then was it I who gave it thee, gave it thee out of love. And this is my reward. Had I but known it! Ah me, unhappy one! (*Bursts into tears.*)

SABUD (*draws her to him, tries to calm her*). No tears, no tears! There—smile again! I will do all that thou dost wish. All, all! How could I know thou hadst so set thine heart upon it? How could I dream of such a thing? My spirit flew to meet thee free from all bonds. How could I think of anything but hold thee in mine arms—and kiss thee, love thee—in all-rapturous embrace? How could I thank thee otherwise than through my love? Had my first thought been to bring thee some other thing, then hadst thou had good reason for thine anger. Is that not so—thou seest it now? Be thy sweet self again!

(ABISHAG *nods.*)

SABUD. Come love, be kind again. Give me one kiss!

ABISHAG (*gives a last sigh, kisses him*). And now, tell me.

SABUD. Impossible!

ABISHAG. How then? Did he not tell thee?

SABUD. Of course!

ABISHAG. He revealed to thee the language of the birds?

SABUD. He did so.

ABISHAG (*takes his hand*). Come, sit thee down beside me. (*Leads him to divan.*) Come. Tell me!

SABUD. Why?

ABISHAG. I told thee why. From me thou mayest have no secret.

SABUD. But if the King bid?

ABISHAG. Then doth thine heart forbid, if thou dost love me. Let us not try conclusions in the matter of love.

SABUD. And why shouldst thou desire to know the language of the birds?

ABISHAG. To know the secrets that they bring to thee, so shalt thou have no secrets left from me.

SABUD. 'Tis well, then, that I can not impart it thee.

ABISHAG. Thou canst not? He did not grant thy prayer?

SABUD. What thinkest thou of him? He promised it me, and his word is sacred to him. 'Tis true. He was displeased with me—with the boldness of my request—for bold it was—nay, treasonable, it now

appears to me, to grasp thus at the inmost secret of his power. But he kept his word. 'I will let thee know it,' did he say, 'but first must thou swear to me to impart it to no living soul. And breakest thou thine oath, then art thou doomed to die.'

ABISHAG. And thou didst swear that oath?

SABUD. I did.

ABISHAG (*rises*). Then break the oath.

SABUD (*rises*). What asketh thou of me?

ABISHAG (*relentlessly*). If thou lovest me, then must thou break thine oath. Such oath he should not have required of thee! That was a sin against me, thy wife! With such an oath he separateth us, *he* who himself brought us together.

SABUD. The Lord giveth—and the Lord doth take.

ABISHAG. And slaves submit. But he that would be master of his fate doth not submit, he breaketh his chains, with strong hand. Be a man and break thy chains.

SABUD. To satisfy thy curiosity?

ABISHAG. So as to stand before me as a free man.

SABUD. No, but to satisfy thy curiosity. That is the point. And for that should I risk my head?

ABISHAG. At least!

SABUD. Thou jestest. But it was his sober earnest. Did he not swear to me, 'Tellest thou of this thing to whomsoever it be, then shalt thou die the death by headsman's hand!'

ABISHAG. But *I*, am I then 'whomsoever?' I, thy wife, ever to whom thine heart should go out in fullest confidence? If he did tell it thee, then hath he told it unto me also. Well doth he know it! Are we not one—one flesh, one soul? Come—tell it me! Oh come, and quickly so, and I will thank thee—thank thee most wondrously. Oh, I will kiss thy feet, will be thy slave, will give myself to thee with tenderness untold, with kisses that shall never cloy upon thee.

SABUD (*still refractory*). Lead me not into temptation!

ABISHAG. Come—put thine arm round me. Tell it me.

SABUD (*losing his temper*). Woman, have done! Make me not perjure myself!

ABISHAG (*drawing herself up*). Who would not perjure himself for me, he loves me not!

SABUD. Who perjures himself for thy sake, him must thou despise!

ABISHAG. *Love*—not despise.

SABUD. Despise, and rightly so! Despise and mistrust! How couldst thou ever believe him after that, believe he would be true to love and honour? He who once breaks his oath can break it twice!

ABISHAG. Break it then, that other oath too! For by the mere fact of swearing it thou brokest thine oath to me. Thou art in any case forsworn.

SABUD. And were that so—why shouldst thou keep thy word to one forsworn? To such an one thou wouldst not feel in honour bound, and rightly not.

ABISHAG. Thou shalt be true to me—to me alone!
Sworn or unsworn, whomever it concerns, all else
is nothing!

SABUD. Even should it cost my head?

ABISHAG (*emphatically*). Even should it cost thy head!

SABUD. Then wouldst thou rather give me death?

ABISHAG. To me thou art dead already as husband
and as lover, if thou do not grant my wish.

SABUD. If that be true, then art thou lost to me,
whether I keep mine oath or not. Then would,
forsooth, I sooner spare my head.

ABISHAG (*once more insinuating*). Nay—be not
foolish. Why make the worst of things? Thine
head is not in danger. Here (*puts her hand to her
heart*) shall thy secret rest in safety. No soul shall
ever know that thou didst tell it me. And least
of all the King! Be reasonable, not stubbornly
perverse.

SABUD. And even were none to know it—yet
would my conscience ever give me reproach that
I had betrayed mine oath to him, my friend and
benefactor, who was as father to me, and more
than father. My conscience would drive me to
reveal it unto him. Despairingly would I throw
myself at thy feet—and then go forth and of free
will give this mine head into the headsman's hands.

ABISHAG. Thou fool!

SABUD. Thou wilt not believe it of me?

ABISHAG (*contemptuously*). I do, forsooth!

SABUD. And now, wouldst thou still know my secret?

ABISHAG. I would! And I do swear to thee that I will be thy wife no more, no more be thine—from this very minute keep apart from thee and cut our one life in two, if thou persist in thy stiff-neckedness. So hath thy obduracy turned mine heart from thee. Choose now. Shouldst thou persist, then shall I know that thou dost spurn me and disdain my love.

SABUD. As I do live, I swear I spurn thee not! So deeply rooted is my love for thee, that I would die without it!

ABISHAG (*expectantly*). Well, then?

SABUD. So deeply rooted, too, within me is the iron law of honour, that I would sooner die than disobey that law.

ABISHAG (*threateningly*). Then dost thou spurn me!

SABUD. Never! But I will keep my oath.

ABISHAG. Thou heardest mine! Me dost thou spurn? (*Beside herself.*) And who art thou, that dar'st deny to me due offering? The poor priest's son, the simple levite's lamb, was surely born to offering, to humble adoration before that which towers such heavens above him! To him was it vouchsafed to call me his, his own, me, Abishag, the far-famed, much desired, envied Abishag of Shunem! She, whom a king once did find worthy

to rest beside him—who stood so high, that a king's son suffered death for having dared to uplift his eyes to her—she deigned to stoop to thee, to lower herself to thee, to be thy wife and share thy couch! And thou, the beggar's son, thou parasite at the table of the high-placed, thou dost still hesitate to make the sacrifice that her heart is asking of thee! Thou spurnest that which thousands envy thee!

SABUD (*stands as if transfixed before her*). Abishag!
My Abishag!

ABISHAG (*beside herself*). Not thine! Never was I thine! Never shall I be thine! I hate thee! I abhor thee! I curse the moment when my eyes first soiled themselves with the sight of thee! Thou outcast! unclean dog!

SABUD (*stops his ears*). Peace! peace! Stain not thy lips with words so gross! Abishag the most sublime of women—the fairest and most exalted wonder of sweet loveliness that mine eyes did see—and now this transformation! Was I then blind? Do I see right? Or was it all a dream? Can it be true that she who but a moment since seemed to breathe angels' ecstasy, now raves before me there in poison-tongued, frenzied fury? (*Seizes her by the hands.*) Woman, outrage not nature! Insult not through evil words the great Creator, who gave thy voice its dulcetness to praise His works. Rather than suffer it, these hands shall strangle thee and close those lips for

ever! Rather than suffer thee to desecrate the temple beautiful that Abishag once was, rather than that will I break truth and troth—will break my given word—and speak that out, that which I should not speak; that which—thanks be to God—I know not how to speak.

ABISHAG (*bewildered*). How, then. What sayest thou? Knowest thou not?

SABUD (*quickly*). Know it? Of course I know it! And should it thrice cost my head, yet will I tell it thee! (*Perceives the PALACE CHAMBERLAIN, who enters, accompanied by four henchmen, stops short in his speech and shrinks back.*)

CHAMBERLAIN. Our gracious Lord and Master summons thee before his judgment seat, O Sabud! Follow me.

SABUD. Our gracious Lord and Master is all-just! He will not summon Innocence before his judgment seat.

CHAMBERLAIN. Not Innocence, thou speakest truth! Perjured he named thee. ‘Go,’ he commanded, ‘bring Sabud here before me, that he may meet his penalty! He loves his wife! He is infirm of purpose; she is beautiful! He would be more than man, she not the woman that I take her for, had she not made him already tenfold perjured in these short minutes.’ So said the King.

SABUD. He is mistaken—she did not gain her end! (*To her.*) So tell him, Abishag!

ABISHAG (*revengefully*). Never! Thou tremblest for that head of thine more than before my love! Then shalt thou lose thine head, as thou didst lose my love! (*To CHAMBERLAIN.*) The King is just—omniscient! He—(*pointing to SABUD*)—broke his oath—betrayed the secret that his gracious master had confided to him. He hath offended, and must atone his guilt. (*Laughs.*) Take him! Pray, take him then!

SABUD (*gazing with horror at her*). Abishag! What hellish thing is this?

ABISHAG (*with rancorous malignity*). Nay, but attend, lend ear to blissful truth. (*Calls her attendants.*) Hagar here! Rachel—quick! (*The SLAVE-GIRLS hasten in.*) Speed to the market; speed to the bazaar; find the young merchant, ye know which—the young and handsome merchant who sang so pleasingly. Give him my salutations. He can bring his pearls—ye know, the great egg-shaped pearls—bring them himself! *Himself*—forget it not! I wish to see him, hear him sing, regale myself with the sweet music of his voice, that voice mellifluous, singing sweet meaning into words unsaid. Quick, quick! outstrip the wind! Tell him I'm widowed. *His* pearls shall deck my widowhood. Tell him that! (*Laughs.*)

SABUD. Then die! Then sooner die! Thou art beset of Satan! (*Draws his knife and springs at her.*)
(CHAMBERLAIN *makes a sign. Two henchmen seize hold of SABUD, fetter him and lead him away.*)

Another sign and the other two henchmen approach ABISHAG and lay hands on her.)

ABISHAG (*cries out*). What would ye of me?

CHAMBERLAIN. Abishag of Shunem, thou hast wormed thyself into the secrets of my lord the King, secrets that should have been closed to thee and others. Thine own words bore damning witness to it. Thus spoke the King: 'Take Abishag of Shunem, bind her hands and close her mouth, for woman's tongue did ever wag when free! (*Makes a sign. One of the Henchmen lays a cloth over her mouth.*) Take her and bring her to the prison-ward of my women's apartments, there to remain until such time as she shall stand before my judgment seat, to wait her sentence.' So spoke the King. (*To the Henchmen.*) Lead her away!

(*ABISHAG bows her head and walks away between the two Henchmen. CHAMBERLAIN follows.*)

CURTAIN

ACT THREE

Public judgment hall in Royal Palace. In background an open court, surrounded by cloisters, with a fishpond and a fountain in the middle. To the right two lofty doorways leading to interior of palace. To the left, entrance from outer court. Between the two doorways the royal throne, with marble steps leading up to it. SOLOMON stands by fishpond, now and then taking a piece of bread from a basket which a slave holds in readiness for him, and throws the bread to the fishes. HEAD CHAMBERLAIN enters, walks in direction of throne, intending to go into palace. Notices King standing by fishpond and makes obeisance, without approaching.

CHAMBERLAIN. Master——

SOLOMON (*looks up*). Back already?

CHAMBERLAIN. Master, thy commands are carried out. The prisoners await thy will.

SOLOMON. And the woman? Hast thou brought her also?

CHAMBERLAIN. I have, O Master. And separately from him, as thou didst order. He knows not that she is a prisoner, too.

SOLOMON. 'Tis well.

CHAMBERLAIN. He is in despair. He implores the favour of being admitted into thy presence.

SOLOMON (*smiling*). That favour doth he ask?
(*Throws some bread to the fishes. Then says carelessly.*) It shall be granted him. Let the headsman hold himself in readiness!

CHAMBERLAIN. As thou commandest, Master.

SOLOMON. Let the woman be brought before me.

CHAMBERLAIN. I hear and obey, O Lord and Master.

SOLOMON. But let her think that I have questioned him already. Then will she not know what he hath said, and I shall be able to assert that which I know to be true—she will not deny it. Bring her here.

(*CHAMBERLAIN makes obeisance and retires. SOLOMON walks round the pond. ABISHAG is led in veiled. The Warders range themselves on either side of entrance. SOLOMON pretends not to see. Goes on feeding the fishes. Lets ABISHAG wait.*)

ABISHAG (*makes a sudden attempt to pass the warders, but is prevented*). Let me pass! Make way for me!

SOLOMON (*approaches slowly, remains standing between two pillars in the arcade, some little way off*).
What is it then?

(*ABISHAG rushes forward and throws herself at his feet.*)

SOLOMON (*to the warders*). Withdraw!

(*They retire. He signs to the slaves waiting outside, and they also disappear through court.*)

SOLOMON (*to ABISHAG*). Rise! (*ABISHAG rises. SOLOMON holds out his hand to help her up. She*

stands before him, her hands crossed over her breast, with bowed head. He raises her veil. As if dazzled by her beauty, he takes a step backwards and lets fall the veil again. Makes as if suddenly repressing his emotion and gazes at her searchingly. Says with a touch of raillery.) So this sweet face is but a mask! Instead of loyal devotion, instead of cheerful obedience, ambition, obduracy, presumption, defiance lurk behind it!

ABISHAG (*uncertain*). What meanest thou, O Master?

SOLOMON. Thy doing was it, then? 'Twas thou that made him ask of me my knowledge, the language of the birds?

ABISHAG (*quickly*). Hath he said so?

SOLOMON. No thing doth he deny, when *I* him ask. 'Twas *thine*, the thought to make my secret thine own, cost what it might. To gratify thine ambition he had to dare that which he never of himself had dared! Thy curiosity, I trow, did sorely trouble thee?

ABISHAG (*evasively*). O Lord and Master—I assure thee——

SOLOMON (*still gazing at her admiringly*). Confess but frankly—yes or no?

ABISHAG (*noting the impression she seemingly has made upon the King*). Then yes! (*Looks at him coquettishly.*)

SOLOMON. How wish to share that which is *mine* with *me*, and he—thy husband? Then dost thou love—me?

ABISHAG (*with obeisance*). To thee all kneel with love. Doth that displease thee?

SOLOMON (*smiling*). Not that.

ABISHAG (*quickly grasping his hand*). Then of thy grace thou dost accord indulgence? (*Is about to kiss his hand.*)

SOLOMON (*draws back his hand*). Thou speakest of homage, seemly deference. I spoke of love. For love alone may everything demand! Who truly loves, may ask of the loved one all!

ABISHAG. Thou speakest truth!

SOLOMON. Only not that which duty him bids withhold. Love asks not that. To ask for that and speak of love, 'tis but hypocrisy!

(ABISHAG *looks away, conscious-stricken.*)

SOLOMON. Thou art his wife, hast promised him obedience, faithfulness—thou knewest thy asking well might cost his head, yet didst thou ask! Thou lovest him not.

ABISHAG. I hate him!

SOLOMON. I know such hate. Well do I know it. He that hath known such hate, henceforth is weaned of love. Thou 'hatest' him then?

ABISHAG. With deadly hate.

SOLOMON. Poor Sabud! What did he to thee?

ABISHAG (*vehemently*). Nothing!

SOLOMON (*pretends to be astonished*). Nothing?

ABISHAG (*with increasing vehemence*). And is not that enough? Is it not the height of outrage to see a loved wife sitting there immersed in tears and give her sighs no answer, but cold indifference? To give *me* no reply—say no to me! Death were light penance!

SOLOMON. A bench of women would most surely pass death sentence.

ABISHAG (*vehemently*). And rightly so!

SOLOMON. Where hate doth judge, 'tis called 'revenge,' not 'right.'

ABISHAG. 'Tis surely right to nurse revenge for such a wrong?

SOLOMON. No. Thy lips call for revenge. But deep within thee crieth another voice, crieth most audibly—thou hear'st it not, for thou art deaf! But if, instead of me, Sabud stood here, unhesitating, ready to reveal the secret that he, on pain of death, hath bound himself to keep, that voice would speak and say, 'Be silent! Hold thy peace! I have no wish to hear!'

ABISHAG. Never!

SOLOMON. Then would'st thou have him speak?

ABISHAG. I would.

SOLOMON. And play sweet dalliance, cosset to heart's content?

ABISHAG. Give him such rich reward as only woman's love can give!

SOLOMON. And then to let him die?

ABISHAG. My love is something worth.

SOLOMON. Thy love is dearly bought!

ABISHAG. Who thinks the price too high—let him forego the prize!

SOLOMON (*pauses a moment, then says*). To my servants thou didst declare that he had told thee all. To *me* thou sayest he refused to answer—that thou hatest him—wouldst wish him dead! He did not fail me then? Then I must pardon him?

ABISHAG. No, let him die! He told me all.

SOLOMON (*smiling*). Then why this hate?

ABISHAG. Because he did not hasten to me of *himself*, freely to tell me all of his own accord, in spite of deadly danger. Because he wanted pressing.

SOLOMON (*with gentle irony*). That was in truth a bad beginning. Require pressing—where treason is so tempting! (*with a wave of his hand, as if satisfied*). So he refused to answer as in duty bound—and afterwards he freely told thee all?

ABISHAG. He did!

SOLOMON (*changing his tone*). Then is the secret of my power laid in thy hands? My soul's great crowning treasure given in trust to thee? Spouse of my soul of souls art thou become? And my

soul knew it not? (*Points to throne.*) There by my side doth thou aspire to sit? Mayhap a cubit higher? Forsooth, thou aimest high!

ABISHAG (*stung by his disdainful tone, draws herself up proudly*). No higher than once was me vouchsafed!

SOLOMON (*with clouded brow*). My father David was an exalted ruler. Far be it from me to impugn his greatness! Nevertheless 'tis *I* that *am* what he but—*was*. His crown adorns *my* head! The word that brings life or death in this great realm springs from *my* lips. What *was*, no longer rules! Thou art not well advised to wish to recall to life that which once *was*! (*With violent brutality.*) Only as *paramour* wast thou permitted to approach him—never as consort!

ABISHAG (*vehemently*). Whose lips do speak such things? Even his, who set me as his great father's consort so high above all other women of the palace, that he punished his own brother with death for having dared merely to give utterance to the forbidden wish to possess me, Abishag of Shunem!

SOLOMON. I did but honour my father's bed.

ABISHAG. O King, thou *sayest* so! But wrongly! Thy father's memory would not have hindered *thee*.

SOLOMON (*stung to the quick*). Thou liest!

ABISHAG (*excitedly*). Am I then deaf and blind? Dost think I saw not how thy glances sought me stealthily, full of desire repressed? Sleeping I would have felt it—could have distinguished that which quivered in thy voice, beneath words of specious indifference. Beseeming reverence for my lord the King bade me keep silence. But sorely was I tempted to cast myself at thy feet and say, ‘Great Master, take and command thy slave!’

SOLOMON. Tempted to *say* so, aye! But secretly only tempted to—rule over me!

ABISHAG. And that did trouble thee? Solomon himself—the King of kings, afraid of a woman? That will I not believe! Take the whole world to witness—even then I believe it not! When, all for me, thou didst strike down thy brother, my soul rejoiced: ‘He himself desireth thee! He loves thee! Justly he let him die!’ My heart did leap with joy. I hoped, I waited for thee to take me by the hand and lead me openly before the people and there proudly to proclaim before the whole world, ‘Behold my soul’s espoused, and worthy of me. Mine own and mine alone!’

SOLOMON. Peace!

ABISHAG. But thou, thou wert faint-hearted. Thou didst not dare admit that out of jealousy thou gavest thy brother his death, and rather sought refuge in thy father’s ‘memory,’ and didst forbid thyself that thing for which thy substance burned.

SOLOMON (*stamping his foot*). I tell thee, hold thy peace!

ABISHAG. As a dutiful 'son,' forsooth, thou mightest not desire thine own father's widow—although he had never known me! And so thou threwest me—to the first——

SOLOMON. First—after me. That was no trifling thing! Thy vision sought the throne. Next to the throne, I gave thee the first place. But not for thee to use it as a point of vantage from which to maintain the struggle for my power!

ABISHAG. I want thee only—not thy power!

SOLOMON. I do but hear the promptings of thine heart, not what thy lips asseverate. Within thee whispers low—but not inaudible to a fine ear—the will to power—*my* power! And since he—*Sabud*—had my soul's key to hand, he was marked out for thine accomplice, that was all! And thus didst thou insinuate thyself into mine inmost sanctuary.

ABISHAG (*fanatically*). The sanctuary of thy great princely soul, aye, surely so! And so will I continue to storm the fortress, take it bit by bit, till it be wholly *mine*—until such time as thou shalt throw wide the gates, no longer seeking escape in subterfuge, but find me worthy to sit there by thy side.

SOLOMON (*smiling*). Until I bend before thee and place thy foot upon my neck?

ABISHAG (*insinuatingly*). And were that then so terrible a thing?

SOLOMON (*gives her a slight slap on the cheek*). What boundless things a little chatterbox can rattle forth! True or not true, 'tis all the same to her, and firm her faith in all her lips give out! To *me* thou wouldst be comrade? The wedded of my soul? Thou art then certain of thyself, of thine own will—the wherefore, when, and whither of thy purpose? Perchance thinkst to divine the workings of my mind?

ABISHAG (*smiling*). Thou dost not think I can?

SOLOMON. No! I will enlighten thee. (*Claps his hands.*)

(CHAMBERLAIN *hastens in, obeisance.*)

SOLOMON. Conduct her to the women's apartments, let her be decked, and royally, made ready for great ceremony. We are disposed to celebrate a wedding here. And speedily!

(CHAMBERLAIN, *obeisance, goes to doorway and signs to those within. The attendant women of the palace hasten to ABISHAG, and help her with her veil. ABISHAG makes reverence to KING and is escorted by Attendants into interior of palace.*)

SOLOMON (*briskly*). And now bring Sabud here!

(CHAMBERLAIN *retires hastily to the left.*)

SOLOMON (*looking pleased*). Friend Sabud, this will give thee something to wonder at! Glad news to thy suspense! (*Seats himself on throne.*)

(SABUD *is led in, fettered.*)

SOLOMON (*looks at him with an ironical smile, then signs to henchmen*). Remove his fetters!
(*They do so.*)

SOLOMON. Retire!

(*They do so.*)

SOLOMON (*rises, walks up and down, stops in front of SABUD, looks piercingly into his eyes, then walks up and down again, seemingly struggling with suppressed emotion, then stops short and says vehemently, stamping his foot*). Thou weakling, thou that couldst not tame me even a rebellious woman!

SABUD. Master——

SOLOMON. Thou wert a coward! And she, made doubly bold through thine infirmity, grasped at my crown, and even audaciously did venture to probe my soul and from its innermost recesses to call up the King to fell rebellion against the King himself.

SABUD. Master——

SOLOMON (*still more vehemently*). Thou shouldst have tamed her!

SABUD. Master, I love her!

SOLOMON. Tamed her, I tell thee, love or no love! That was thy duty. 'Tis now too late. Now must I widow her, tame her myself! (*Walks up and down.*)

SABUD (*with a bitter smile*). Speaks thus the friend?

SOLOMON (*stops, exclaims with disdainful vehemence*). Friendship is buried! Honour is here at stake, my

manly honour. Manhood is paramount! What booteth a friendship, ready to betray the friend at the first cooing of a vain woman? To-day she bids thee steal my secret. To-morrow hands thee the dagger, saying, 'Strike!' And thou dost strike!

SABUD. Dire are thy words.

SOLOMON (*still more vehemently*). And strike thou wouldst, I tell thee! Hard and deep! And therefore I will forestall thee! Thou shalt die!

SABUD. Then do I die most innocent.

SOLOMON. What signifieth guilt or innocence? The point is, *thou* or *I*? Then thou, of course!

SABUD. Thou hast the power. Art lord over life and death.

SOLOMON (*contemptuously*). And thou the sacrificial lamb, meekly waiting to be slaughtered! (*Takes him by the shoulders and shakes him.*) Can nothing rouse thee then, not even mortal danger? Alike as friend or foe I meet in thee the same impassibility! Fly at my throat—'twere well! Strike for thy life! Hast thou no weapon? (*Thrusts him away, plucks the dagger from his own girdle and throws it at SABUD's feet.*) There!

SABUD (*takes up dagger, kisses it, and hands it humbly on his open hands back to SOLOMON*). May God forbid that ever I lift my hand against my benefactor! Dearer to me than life thy friendship was. And should I forfeit it, that doth not loose me now from grateful obligation!

SOLOMON (*takes hold of dagger*). Dearer than life thou heldest friendship. I believe thee. But dearer than friendship was thy dog-like submission to her will. (*Throws away dagger.*) Sabud, my friend, why for a woman's smile didst thou betray me?

SABUD. Why ask? Thou knowest well I *could* not have betrayed thee even had I willed.

SOLOMON. Could or could not, what difference! Thou hadst the will and wish and purpose to. And that sufficed. I put thee to the test and thou didst fail.

SABUD. Most cruelly hast thou played with me!

SOLOMON. Thou art right. I played with thee most cruelly—and thou with me. Thou staked thy head. My stake was greater.

SABUD (*vehemently*). No word, no hint of thy great Secret hast thou dared to breathe!

SOLOMON. And had I done so, had I even risked my crown, small matter that compared to what I really did risk—*thy friendship*. 'Twas nearest my heart. I played the game, and lost (*presses his hands to his breast*). Here died that which I once called Sabud! The charm that once went out of him straight to my heart—is lost! (*places his hands on SABUD's shoulders*). No thing on earth was nearer to me—nor man nor woman—neither child nor mother! I loved thee, was prepared to give up all for thee, to share mine all with thee! Alas, thou wast unworthy of such sacrifice. The

spirit of friendship's give and take, thou understoodst it not. Instead, thou *tookest from me my dearest friend*—thyself—gave our great friendship into hostile hands, didst throw thyself away. My faith in thee, to me so dear—my bedrock trust in thy fidelity—that hast thou slain! So will I slay the rest! (*Lays his hand upon the golden circlet that decks his brow.*) Under this diadem henceforth nought shall dwell but iron will, cold calculation, circumspection wise, impassibility!

(*Violent twittering from the birds outside. SOLOMON stops short and listens in silence.*)

SABUD. Thou art silent? Art thou then stricken dumb? (*Takes his hand.*) Wilt thou not teach me the language of the birds, then tell me at the least what means that twittering? What were they crying aloud, an instant since, into thy very conscience?

SOLOMON (*frees himself*). And did all living Nature cry aloud into my conscience, it could not reach a heart turned into stone and make a dead thing live!

(*Violent twittering renewed.*)

SOLOMON (*vehemently*). No! No pity here! When this my life's last faith was taken from me—my kingly duty and my will to rule had long since stifled love—when faith in *friendship* failed—then did my conscience die; mine heart was changed to stone.

(*Renewed twittering outside.*)

SOLOMON (*with vehemence*). No pity! I have said!
(*Claps his hands.*)

(CHAMBERLAIN *enters, makes obeisance.*)

SOLOMON. Then let the headsman come!

(CHAMBERLAIN *obeisance, retires hurriedly.*)

SOLOMON (*to SABUD*). That which gave life its value,
I tore it from my breast and cast it off. I paid
my debt of honour. Now thy turn!

(*Headsman, a gigantic, half-naked negro, carrying a drawn sword on his shoulder, enters, followed by CHAMBERLAIN and four henchmen.*)

SOLOMON (*to CHAMBERLAIN*). Is the feast ready and
the procession formed?

CHAMBERLAIN. As thou didst order, Master!

SOLOMON. Let Abishag of Shunem come before me.

The royal circlet place upon her brow. (CHAMBERLAIN *starts back, astounded.*) It is my will!

And let the trumpets sound—the treasures of my
garden strew before her as she comes. As a great
princess shall she tread o'er purple carpets.

CHAMBERLAIN. I hasten. (*Goes towards doorway.*)

SOLOMON (*mounting throne*). And where the purple
endeth, before her feet I spread one carpet more of
reddest heart's blood. For her alone 'twas made,
for her to tread upon!

SABUD (*stands as if benumbed, without comprehending*).

Abishag? And what of her? What meaneth this?

SOLOMON (*laughs*). What else then should it be?

Abishag, 'thine' Abishag, for sake of whom thou

didst betray my friendship, this very moment decks herself (*points to doorway*) in there all for the wedding-feast—to wed with me, when once thy head is fallen!

SABUD (*beside himself*). Then die! (*Snatches up dagger from floor and rushes at SOLOMON, but is seized by henchmen on steps of throne and is overpowered by them after a short but violent struggle.*)

SOLOMON. On his knees with him! Fetter him well!
(*They force him on his knees and bind him.*)

SOLOMON. Headsman, sharpen thy sword!
(*The Headsman salutes the King with his sword.*)

SOLOMON. And when the bride stands here before my throne, and herself gives thee the sign—then, but *not till then*, thou mayest strike, and send him over there whence there is no return—send him away with staring eyes and disenchanted heart, now bared of woman's faith. Then death will welcome be—the pangs of parting small.

(*The carpets covering the doorway are drawn aside. Out of the distance comes sound of trumpets, flutes, and cymbals gradually nearing. The wedding procession approaches. First the musicians with harps, flutes, and cymbals, then girls, strewing flowers, then ABISHAG, splendidly attired with the royal circlet on her brow, then attending women, and last of all the PALACE CHAMBERLAIN, all with palm branches in their hands. SOLOMON standing erect in front of throne, gazing with triumphant mien at spectacle.*)

Just as procession has reached steps of throne, he stretches out his hand commandingly. ABISHAG falls back a step. All stop. Music ceases.

SOLOMON (*laughing scornfully*). Ha, ha! A picture of your marriage this, I trow! Thou 'Lord' and 'Master' for sake of her ever forced to proffer thy head to the headsman! She decking her charms for sale to all the world. Now, Abishag, go to! All is prepared, precisely come to pass as thou didst wish. Now give with thine own hand the sign—there stands the headsman!

(*ABISHAG starts back with a shudder.*)

SOLOMON. Give him the sign—and free thyself! See here—the throne! Make thyself free! Ascend!

(*ABISHAG stretches out her hands towards the throne, takes a deep breath, throws back her head energetically, glances towards headsman, about to give him the sign, but hesitates at the sight of SABUD, kneeling before her, covers her eyes with her hands.*)

SOLOMON (*triumphantly*). Now, Abishag, the throne awaits thee! Without blood no throne was won. The sign, Abishag—the sign! And his head shall fall!

ABISHAG (*stretching out her hands towards him*). I cannot!

SOLOMON. Thou 'canst' not? Why? Didst not thyself demand his death? Shall I then—let him live? (*She is silent.*) Art silent? Thou wilt not seal his death, nor speak the saving word? (*To*

SABUD.) For such an one hast thou risked all! (*To Headsman.*) Then let him rise! Unfetter him!

(*Headsman takes off fetters, helps SABUD to rise.*)

SOLOMON (*goes up to SABUD*). Hear me, my friend.
I never wished thy life!

SABUD. But took from me more than life—love's happiness—through thy most grievous charge.

SOLOMON. I charged thee but to wish, and nothing more. I trusted thou wouldst ask *my friendship*.

SABUD. I had thy friendship.

SOLOMON. And didst not see our friendship was in danger! I trusted thou at last wouldst comprehend, and *of thyself* make haste to rescue it. Instead of that thou temptedst fortune and wast content to act as mouthpiece to her vanity (*points to ABISHAG*), and for so small thanks. That was not wise, good Sabud! That brings thee death. Not that the headsman shall cut off thy head. That head thou lost long since. *Marriage* shall act thine executioner. Marriage to thee spells certain death. So be it then as thou hast willed! (*To Headsman.*) Conduct him to my women's apartments and call aloud—'Thus wills the King, if 'mongst ye all, there be but *one* that prayeth for his life, then shall he live—with *her*!'

ABISHAG (*cries out*). With another? No, never shall that be! To Tophet send him, and may he there amongst the hellish shades seek his companion!

SABUD (*beside himself with joy*). O Abishag! Mine Abishag! That gave me back my life! And now, O King, whether or not thou let'st me die, *yet do I live*—for have I not her love! She loveth me! (*Throws himself at her feet and kisses the hem of her garment.*)

SOLOMON (*ironically*). Aye! she 'loveth' thee! And therefore she hated thee with deadly hate! Therefore she grudges thee another's love—and standeth here decked as another's bride, prepared to be his spouse, not thine! So doth she love thee, Sabud!

SABUD. Never will I believe it! (*To her.*) And did the whole world bear witness against thee, yet would I not believe it! So tell him that he lies!

SOLOMON. Aye, tell him thyself, O Abishag! For whom hast thou adorned thee in bridal habit?

ABISHAG. Who asks? Who asked (*points to throne*) if I would be seated there as the King's royal consort? Thou, thyself!

SOLOMON. I asked what was *thy* will. But never did I speak of *mine own will*! And now once more, and loudly, calling the world to witness, I thee ask: Wilt thou be *mine*, spouse to the King himself? Consider well what answer thou doth give. Much hangs upon thine answer!

ABISHAG (*still uncertain as to his intentions. With some hesitation*). When the King asks—as King—who should dare answer nay?

SOLOMON (*pulls out a whip from his girdle. Aloud to headsman*). Then take her out and whip her. Mind, whip her well, so shall she learn obedience, and become worthy of me! Then shall my lips give answer to her wish.

(*Headsman is about to take hold of whip.*)

SABUD (*dashes between them, seizes hold of whip*). No—thou shalt not!

SOLOMON (*with a loud laugh*). Well done, friend Sabud! So do I love thee! 'Not thou, but me,' thine eyes did say. 'Tis well. Then keep the whip. Let it not leave thy hand, lest worse befall thee. (*Goes up to him laughing.*) I tell thee, Sabud, he who knows not how to tame the loved one's whims, who never could say no, nor stem the tide before it overflows all bounds and doth become a law unto itself, his only help lies in—the whip. Keep thou that magic wand. And make good use of it. There's nothing brings such quick conviction to the feminine mind. (*Gives a loud laugh again. A clamorous twittering from outside. He listens a moment, goes out into the arcade and beckons gardenwards.*) Aye, laugh, laugh on, ye free ones! Laugh at our human folly and despair! 'Tis worth a laugh—no more. (*The twittering continues. He turns suddenly to ABISHAG, and points to garden.*) Dost hear, O Abishag? The twittering was of thee!

(*ABISHAG turns away.*)

SOLOMON (*goes up to her, takes hold of her arm*). Now

let me see thy skill. What say the birds? Thou know'st their language. Sabud told it thee!

SABUD (*quickly*). How were that possible? Without a word from thee!

SOLOMON. Thou art mistaken, Sabud! I told thee all—but only not in words. For how were't possible in poor *human* words to express—the language of the birds? In terms of words—the road circuitous—man clothes his thoughts. (*With dignity.*) Feeling, not idle words, should be thy language. Nature's *great universal language* that thrills in every heart—then art thou all-wise, then hath this life no secret more for thee, then shalt thou read in every heart as in an open book. In *that* language did I speak unto thee—long since—but thou didst not reply. Thy heart was dulled, as mine henceforth shall be unto the call of thine! And from this moment thou must cleave to her and see if thou succeed in waking response in her and force her to obedience! So shalt thou teach her the language of the birds. Or else she'll do't to thee! (*Gives a loud laugh and walks to and fro.*)

ABISHAG (*violently*). Forsooth, before he learns it from thy lips, I'll teach it him myself!

SOLOMON. Good grounding in the art thou hadst thyself, before he came. My lady peacock's fashions—turkey inflation—the cackling of the hen in laying mood—and, last not least, the sweet twittering that would insinuate itself into our

good grace—all that ye women know, have ever known.

ABISHAG (*still more violently*). Only not heartlessly to mock at those we think are helpless! (*Tears golden diadem from her head and throws it at SOLOMON's feet.*) There, take back the token of thine impotence! I have no need of it—need not thy knowledge—need not thy power. I am content *with mine own power*. It gave me power enough!

(SOLOMON *laughs.*)

ABISHAG. Thou laughest! Thou believ'st it not! Shall I tell thee what the birds out there were twittering of? Shall I interpret the meaning of their laugh?

SOLOMON. Continue!

ABISHAG. 'Abishag,' they said, 'thou art not wise, thou lettest him muzzle thee, mock thee, mock thee most heartlessly, and wound thee to the quick! And yet thou art a thousand times more powerful than thy tormentor. A glance from thee and the great Solomon, a king, trembles in his magnificence. A sign from thee, and lo! thy husband's life is in the balance! Just as it pleaseth thee. And for thy pleasure only.' So said the birds. And they were right. And thou that tremblest before me, thou comest to me with the whip! Behold, O King, I can undo the magic of the magician's wand! (*Advances, about to kiss the whip that SABUD still holds in his hand.*)

SABUD (*prevents her*). No—your lips! (*Kisses her passionately, holds her embraced.*)

ABISHAG (*to SOLOMON*). Well, didst see how quick the ‘magic’ vanished. (*Takes the whip from SABUD, and throws it away.*)

SABUD (*goes up to CHAMBERLAIN, who in meantime has picked up ABISHAG’S diadem, takes it from him and gives it to SOLOMON*). There—take that which is thine—and leave me what is mine! (*Embraces ABISHAG with his right arm in such a manner that his mantle covers them both.*) Come, my beloved! (*Hastens away with her.*)

CHAMBERLAIN. Quick, after them!

SOLOMON (*to attendants, who are about to rush after them*). No, let them run! (*Remains standing, lost in thought, with the diadem in his hand.*) Her much-desired diadem is then no longer hers! (*Looks at diadem, hands it to headsman with a sudden impulse.*) In vain thy sword was whetted! There—cut it me in two and give it Sabud—greet him from me and tell him, ‘Thus saith the King. No metal wrought of man was e’er so strong, that the King’s pleasure could not sever it.’ Such headsman’s message will surely do its work!

(*Headsman takes diadem.*)

SOLOMON. No—after all, not that! But hand them each one half and say to them, ‘King Solomon sends his crown—in common shall ye bear it when

ye can solve this riddle: how piece together that which was parted once, nor leave the joiner's mark?' No, no! rather say nothing! Give it here! (*Takes diadem and gives it to CHAMBERLAIN.*) Bear it to my treasure-chamber, and take good care of it. 'Tis not our wish to play the tempter here, nor bring perplexity to simple minds. (*Immersed in thought, speaking to himself.*) Abishag of Shunem, fairest of flowers fair, sweet is thy perfume—so bitter sweet as red blood newly shed! A rose art thou, and whom thy thorns have touched, his wound shall never heal. And thou my kingly heart (*puts his hand to his heart*)—desire insatiable—give a loose rein to kingly vagaries and throw thyself away as often as thou wilt, but never there whither thy yearning bids. Then wert thou lost, and we have no wish to lose our inmost self. We have the will to rule—and royally! (*To CHAMBERLAIN.*) The banquet—'tis prepared?

CHAMBERLAIN. As thou didst order, Master!

SOLOMON. Let it be served then! Let them play—wild music, maddening! Command the loveliest dancers! Let them show their skill! Fill the great kingly goblet even to the brim—with flowing fire! And to the cup-bearer my royal grace, if he be worth his office. No measured time. And ere the sun doth set, shall his last rays light up a sight of wonder—and the whole world shall see this golden diadem (*takes crown from off his head and*

lifts it high) transform itself into a wreath of roses in full bloom! (*Replaces crown upon his head, stands up in front of throne.*) Music!

(*Music strikes up marriage march, and bridal procession, without bride, passes before SOLOMON, with deep obeisance and loud cries of joy. Procession disappears into palace. SOLOMON—alone—sinks down on throne and remains seated, looking into blue vacancy with inward gaze.*)

CURTAIN

THE END

Curwen Press:

London

E.13

PT Paul, Adolf Georg
2631 The language of the birds
A74L313

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY

UTL AT DOWNSVIEW



D RANGE BAY SHLF POS ITEM C
39 11 12 05 15 005 5